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ABSTRACT

In a two-stage procedure to discover how children use television commercials in family group viewing situations, researchers first conducted thirty family interviews with as many family members present as possible; then they selected nine children's families for extended (three month) participant observation to study the formative aspects of each child's interaction with television commercial content. The collected observation data supported the view that children are capable of knowingly interpreting and using commercials to change the character of viewing situations by involving others in planned social interaction. These interactions include (1) using commercials to draw others into conversations and activities (whether related or unrelated to message content), (2) seeking information from parents or siblings to resolve ambiguous or complex message presentations, and (3) using commercials to avoid the demands and requests of others, especially parents. The observed interactions indicate that television and its content are social objects used by the child to manipulate viewing situations and social actions. In effect, the child is not a passive observer of television, but an active viewer. (RL)

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# A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF CHILDREN'S USE OF TELEVISION COMMERCIALS TO INITIATE SOCIAL INTERACTION IN FAMILY GROUP VIEWING SITUATIONS

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A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF CHILDREN'S USE OF TELEVISION COMMERCIALS TO INITIATE SOCIAL INTERACTION IN FAMILY GROUP VIEWING SITUATIONS

A great deal of research effort has been directed toward studying the child/television advertising relationship. Surprisingly, few studies are to be found in the literature which may be termed sociological in nature.[1] Most of the recent studies present television advertising as a powerful shaper of child development, yet there is no apparent agreement as to what those social influences are. The literature represents isolated pockets of findings, but these pockets in no way interrelate to give an overall view describing the role of television advertising in children's everyday social lives. Perhaps the only consistent conclusion that has been drawn is that children's responses to television commercials reflect age-graded stages of cognitive development, which may become increasingly more complex and differentiated with chronological age.[2]

At the beginning of the 1950's early television research produced several studies that dealt with social, contextual, and interactional variables but little continuing work has been generated.[3] McQuail has suggested some reasons for this.

> Why a sociology of mass communications has been so late in developing requires further explanation. The answer seems to lie in the overwhelming dominance, amongst the variety of possible approaches, one of two themes or orientations, one concerned with mass society, its politics and culture, and the other stemming from the great expenditure of resources on empirical studies of the direct effects of mass communications on the opinions, attitudes information and behavior of the individuals exposed to them.[4]

Among the early sociologically-oriented television researchers and perhaps the best known, were the Rileys and E. E. Maccoby.[5] Their studies presented rival interpretations of the role of television and its content in the family unit. The Rileys argued that the viewing situation provides "a bridge from parent to child" and "encourages family solidarity" through shared experience. They viewed children's experience with television as a vital force that stimulates social interaction among family group members. The opposite view was expressed by Maccoby who suggested that viewers in the family group maintain parallel relationships with broadcast material, shutting off the possibility of interaction with others.

Only recently have these conflicting interpretations been empirically tested. In a study designed to examine the general character of child television viewing, Frazer found that television viewing in the family setting constitutes an opportunity for interactional or parallel experiences for the child.[6] Notes Frazer:

> Television viewing, like other social activities, can be manipulated by the actors in the situation, and takes on the character which they give it. The children under study played numerous roles in the

> television environment and manipulated the television input like any other social object might be manipulated. The children displayed surprising sophistication at managing the role of television in the viewing environment, using it to control and enhance social interaction.[7]

This study, grounded in the sociological perspective and method of symbolic interactionism,[8] is designed to extend Frazer's findings to an uninvestigated aspect of the child/television advertising relationship. Specifically, it seeks to uncover if children use television commercials in family group viewing situations to initiate, control, and manipulate social interaction with other family group members, especially their parents (ie., using commercials to negotiate play with siblings, to negotiate consumption requests with parents, to initiate conversation with others, etc.). The investigation focuses on the influence of interactional factors from the point of view of the child as part of the family group viewing situation. The following section briefly overviews the methodological advantages of the symbolic interactionist perspective for sociological inquiries of communication phenomena. Subsequent sections detail the precise methodological strategy used in this investigation and present the collected observational data.

## METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The term symbolic interactionism refers to a unique social/psychological perspective on human behavior. Use of the symbolic interactionist perspective as a theoretical basis for an examination of the child/television advertising relationship dictates a different conceptualization for study and necessitates a different methodological approach which allows for a better fit of research strategy to the empirical world. Specifically, four reasons make this line of inquiry a methodological approach well suited for studying particular aspects of child television viewing.

First of all, study takes place in the real world environment of television, thus grounding the research in the natural setting of the activity to be examined. The research is based on data collected by observation of children in their own homes viewing television. Instances of the child viewing by himself, with his parents and with his peers and siblings are observed and recorded.

Secondly, an effort is made by the researcher to understand the disposition on the part of the subjects toward the activity. Human action is interactive and complex and requires that study of it reflect its changing character. To do this the researcher locates himself in the viewing environment, making himself a party to the activity under study, and talks with children about the commercials and programs that they watch.

Thirdly, the examination of television is made in relation to other influences. Complexity in human action is a partial result of the many influences which interact and continually redefine a social situation. Cognizance of this requires that the researcher attend not only to observed behavior under study, but to other influences operating within and outside the observed sphere of activity.

Fourth, an attempt is made to study the phenomenon in breadth. Rather than seizing upon one particular variable for exclusive examination, the researcher is open to all possibilities which present themselves. To provide this perspective the researcher familiarizes himself with family's routines, the characteristics of each family organization and the activities of each family. The application of this methodological framework is presented below.

## METHOD

To examine if children's use of television commercials in family group viewing situations to initiate social interaction, two methods were used to gather data:

true nature of the viewing situation. Rather than going to the viewing situation with preceived theoretical notions (e.g., age-graded and determined stages of cognitive development), it forces the researcher to study the empirical nature of the natural viewing situation. Once located in the situation, the researcher then uses behavior specimens to record and reproduce the interactions.[12]

Behavior Specimens

Rather than treating measurement as a separate phase of the research act, behavior specimens were used to capture the actual temporal sequence of the social interaction under analysis. This recording technique provided the opportunity to investigate emerging patterns of child interaction with television commercials and with others in the viewing situation. Moving back and forth between recorded behavioral sequences, behavior specimens allowed the identification of sequential phases of children's behavior, showing how each interactional phase was influences by past phases.[13]

Observational Periods

Children's television programming segments have been identified in the literature.[14] However, since this study was concerned with children's responses to television commercials while in the presence of other family group members, observational periods were selected and scheduled in accordance with natural patterns of family group television viewing. Observations were then scheduled and completed with each of the family groups. To minimize the impact of time, observations were grouped as closely together as possible. The observations were completed over a three month period.

The length and nature of the observations were based on Denzin's[15] demonstrated use of the behavioral episode. Although each observation was scheduled to last

one hour, the actual observational time was guided by the behavior of those in the viewing situation and their constance by direction toward the viewing activity.[16] Beginnings and ends of observational periods were identified by natural breaks in television viewing. As such, episodes lasted until child or some other member of the viewing situation redirected their activity or were redirected. The amount of time actually spent observing varied within the one hour framework, since some periods contained numerous episodes of viewing interaction.

Though the validity and reliability of this sampling strategy might be questioned by those unfamiliar with naturalistic inquiry, the strategy strictly adheres to the fundamental rules accepted by the scientific community. By determining when interaction concerning television commercials routinely occurs, the behavioral observations were situationally recorded and detailed. Reliability was assured by the repeatability of similar viewing time segments across the nine children observed. Addressing the twin problems of validity and reliability, Denzin[17] has observed that the responsible researcher,

> ... samples at "peak times and justifies his decisions by working knowledge of the unit in question. He stratifies and cuts up his subject's behavior into theoretically informed, empirically grounded sub-units. If he has successfully entered the subject's worlds he should know the salient temporal features and he can make sampling-observational decisions on that basis.

## OBSERVATIONAL DATA

Interesting examples of how children use television commercials to involve others in social interaction are presented in the observational data reported below. The format used to report the data is modeled after similar sociological

studies. Before reporting these findings, however, some basic remarks concerning the general character of the child/television relationship should be noted.

As mentioned earlier, children are discontinuous viewers who frequently engage in other activities while watching television. Little uninterrupted viewing was observed over the entire sample of family group observations. As suggested by Frazer, it was found that television viewing has an ongoing, emergent character consisting of many interacting and competing activities and events. As social objects, children act toward and through television commercials in relation to the total interactional character of the viewing situation.

Examples of children knowingly using commercials to change the character of the viewing situation were evident in most of the family group observational records. Perhaps more important to this study, however, is the fact that the use of this sophisticated viewing tactic was observed in preschool children as well as in older, supposedly more cognitively advanced children. Interesting and convincing episodes of this ability are provided in the following behavior sequences of C7, age 5, and E4, age 5.

Behavior Sequence 1

(Sunday evening. C7 is watching television with other members of the family. Commercial for Kellogg's Frosted Flaakes appears on the screen featuring "Tony the Tiger" and a group of children camping in the forest.)

E4: Boy. I can't wait until next week. It's going to be fun going up in the mountains. (directs comment to father)
H4: Probably be cool though.
E4: Yea. But we have sleeping bags like those. (points to commercial) They will keep us pretty warm.
H4: Are you sure you didn't lose some of your gear last time? Remember you couldn't find some of your stuff. (looks concerned)
E4: I'll go get it and we can check it. (runs off and brings back some camping gear)
H4: Let's check it. (attention turns to looking over camping equipment)

Behavior Sequence 2

(Weekday evening. E4 is watching television with other family members. Commercial appears on screen for Goodyear Tires, featuring a "riverboat gambler' dealing cards.)

E4: Hey. Let's play cards. (points to the gambler dealing some cards in the commercial)

T4 (brother) No, I want to watch this.

E4 (goes over to a table and takes out a deck of cards) Ah come on. This is more fun. I always do what you want to do.

T4 Ok, come on then. I can beat you anyway. (E4 sits down and they begin to play cards. Their card game continues for about fifteen minutes.)

The above incidents not only point out the ability of preschool children to plan social action in relation to television commercials but also illustrate the fallacy of attempting to ascribe one role to any viewing situation. Far from being a structured, never-changing situation, children, through interaction with others and television content, define and interpret the viewing situation. As illustrated in the above behavior sequences, children, including preschool children, have the potential ability to take television commercials and to direct and manipulate other activities. These activities, of course, can and often do, change the character of the family group viewing situation.

Not only are television commercials used to change the character of viewing situations; children also use them to avoid the demands of others, particularly those demands made by their parents. An interesting example of the avoidance tactic in use was observed in Family Group Two.

Behavior Sequence 3

(B2, age 6, is watching television with his brother, J2, age 9. J2 instructs B2 that it is his turn to let the family dog outside. Commercial appears on the screen for 9-Lives cat food, featuring "Morris.")

J2: OK. Fuzzy wants to go out and it's your turn to let him out. (points at B2)

B2: Wait a minute, I want to see "Morris."
(continues to look at the screen)

J2: Oh no. He's got to go out now. (grabs the back of B2's shirt)

B2: You let him out. This is my favorite cat. I'll do it next time.

J2: You better. You never do what you are suppose to.
(gets up and lets dog out. B2 continues to watch the commercial.)

A similar example of the tactic in use was observed in Family Group Eight.

Behavior Sequence 4

(Sunday evening. B8 is viewing with other members of the family. The telephone rights.)
W8: B8, please get the telephone. (commercial for Jack-in-the-Box appears on the screen)
B8: I can't now. I want to see this. I like this. (points to commercial on screen)
You get it.
W8: (Gets up and answers telephone)

In these instances, both children skillfully avoided doing something that was requested. To legitimize their avoidance, they deliberately defined the viewing of certain commercials as an activity that is socially appropriate and thus should not be interrupted. In both episodes, the tactic was apparently viewed as legitimate by others since the children avoided honoring the requests.

Other observations revealed children using television commercials to generate conversation with their parents. Such conversations usually centered around attempts to use parents to gain information in order to resolve ambiguous or complex commercial presentations or to simply draw others into conversation about things of interest to them. Interesting examples of this viewing tactic were observed in Family Group Four and Five.

Behavior Sequence 5

(Sunday evening. F4 age 5, is watching television with other family members. Commercial appears for Goodyear American Eagle Radial tire, featuring eagles flying about.)
F4: Hey dad. Look at those birds. One has a white head and the other doesn't. How come? (directs question at H4)
H4: You see, son, the one with the white head is a boy and the other one is a girl. That's nature's way of making them different
F4: Kind'a like boys wearing pants and girls dresses then. (grins at father) Wow. They are big.

Behavior Sequence 6

(Sunday evening. D5, age 7, is watching television with other members of the family. Commercial appears on the screen for local music store. The presentation features a man sitting in King Kong's hand talking about the store. At the commercial's conclusion the man is dropped from the hand.)
D5: Daddy, how do they do that? (referring to man being dropped) It ain't real.
H5: Of course not. That's just a camera trick. They use two pictures.
D5: But how do they use two . . . (H5 interrupts)
H5: Watch television. It isn't real. That's all. (H5 and D5 return to viewing)

The two sequences provide excellent examples of how children use television commercials as social objects to initiate interaction with others. Behavior Sequence 5 illustrates how a commercial can be manipulated to gain information independent of actual message content itself. Behavior Sequence 6 illustrates how interaction can be initiated with others in order to clarify some aspect of message content. Both incidents also suggest that parents are given the opportunity to interpret what is presented their children in commercials, especially when asked specific questions. However, whether they take advantage of this opportunity depends, to some extent, on their particular consumer teaching orientation.

An episode from Family Group Six suggests that children develop and carry out social acts in relation to television commercial content. In the following behavior sequence, B6, age 11, and A6, age 8, actually create a social drama around a television commercial for Rawlings Baseball Gloves featuring Johnny Bench.

Behavior Sequence 7

(Weekday afternoon. B6 and A6 are watching Star Trek. Commercial for Rawlings appears on screen.)
B6: That's Johnny Bench. (points to screen)
Boy, he can hit homers. (gets up and swings a make-believe bat)
A6: (gets up and throws a make-believe pitch)
B6: this one.
B6: Fire one in here. (prepare to take a batting stance)
A6: (winds up and fires) (this scene lasts for about three minutes, as the two pretend to be playing baseball)

This episode convincingly supports the view that it is not the specific content of a mass-mediated message that determines behavior but what the individual brings to it and the actions that he takes toward it that give it meaning.[20] Perhaps the soundest conclusion that can be drawn from this episode, is that children have the ability to use commercials as social objects for shaping and forging their lines of social action and giving meaning to the viewing situation.

## SUMMARY

The observations of this study indicate that television viewing has an emergent character consisting of many interacting and competing activities and events, and through these the child viewer acts toward and through television commercials in relation to the total interactional character of the family viewing situation. The collected observations support the view that children are capable of knowingly interpreting and using commercials to change the character of viewing situations by involving others in planned social interaction. Three specific forms of such interaction were observed: 1) commercials were used to draw others into converations and activities related or unrelated to message content; 2) attempts were made to gain information from parents or siblings in order to resolve ambiguous or complex message presentations; and 3) commercials were used

to avoid the demands and requests of others, especially those made by parents.

While it is difficult to conclude that television viewing provides the "bridge between parent and child" described by Riley, et al.,[21] it seems equally incorrect to conclude that viewing experience is totally parallel as Maccoby[22] has suggested. The soundest conclusion indicated by the data is that television and its content are social objects. Like any other object in the world of the child, for example a cookie jar, television commercials take on contextual meaning based on the actions of those around it. There can be no question that the role of the child is active in the television viewing environment. The view of a passive receiver, even under the most sedate viewing conditions, is an underestimation of the abilities of the child to understand and shape experiences. Clearly from the observations reported here, the child viewer is capable of manipulating viewing situations by developing and carrying out lines of planned social action in relation to television commercials so as to create either a parallel or an interactional context. To attempt a blanket characterization of the role of television commercials in the family group viewing situation as one or the other is to ingnore the observed behavior recorded here.

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